



INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE & AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA-UAW

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GARY CASTEEL, Secretary-Treasurer

**Public Hearing Testimony
Labor and Public Employees Committee
Julie Kushner, Director, UAW Region 9A
HB6874 and HB6876 - Support
March 5, 2015**

Good afternoon Senator Gomes, Representative Tercyak and members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee. My name is Julie Kushner and I am the Director of UAW Region 9A. On behalf of our members who belong to UAW Graduate Employee Union Local 6950, I urge your vote and passage of HB 6876 AAC Public Institutions of Higher Education and Collective Bargaining Agreements and HB6874 AAC Graduate Assistant Benefits.

With this testimony I am presenting the committee with a substitute bill for HB 6874 that requires that the group insurance paid for by UConn for graduate assistants (subject of course to collectively bargained premium shares) be procured through the Comptroller's Partnership Plan, and to give the Comptroller the formal authority/obligation to allow UConn to purchase the group insurance in that manner.

Last year, graduate assistants at UConn organized their union in record time and have been in the process of bargaining their first contract. These workers are dedicated instructors and researchers whose work helps tens of thousands of undergraduate students be successful and contributes to over \$150 million annually in research grants and projects.

Despite their commitment to UConn, graduate assistants have struggled tremendously to live on wages that average \$18,000 to \$20,000 annually while trying to balance the rigors of their teaching and research with their own academic careers and their families.

UConn's graduate assistants enhance the University's competitiveness and play a key role in its success as an important economic engine for the state. They also drive innovation through research helping to bring jobs to the state and they make UConn a world class institution.

The bills before you address three major problems for these workers; 1) eroding health benefits, 2) rising student fees that eat up at least 10% of an already small salary, and 3) limiting access to grievance procedures or state and federal agencies to address discrimination and/or sexual harassment.

HB6874 AAC Graduate Assistant Benefits

HB6874 requires UConn to provide the state's Partnership Plan to UConn's graduate assistants. In 2003, the graduate assistants were removed from the state employee health plan. Since that time, GA health benefits have been reduced, causing an increase in their out of pocket expenses. In 2013, UConn changed its healthcare provider, severely impacting its graduate assistants. We believe, as does the State Comptroller, that providing these workers with the Partnership Plan will improve their benefits at little to no increased cost.

Graduate assistants currently return to the University a minimum of 10% of their salary in mandatory student fees. This bill would seek to remit these fees to working GAs. We believe it's the obligation of the University as the employer to absorb the cost of these remittances.

HB6876 AAC Public Institutions of Higher Education and Collective Bargaining Agreements

UConn is seeking through collective bargaining to limit graduate assistants' access to recourse when discriminated against or sexually harassed. The University would force an individual to choose whether to seek redress through a grievance procedure or through the CHRO.

This bill will make it possible for graduate assistants to have every avenue for recourse available to them.

We understand that you, your colleagues in the legislature and those in state government are marshalling every resource available to address the serious problem of discrimination and sexual harassment on our college campuses. I urge you pass this bill and insist that UConn and all institutions of higher education in Connecticut make it easier and safer to fight discrimination by allowing all legal actions to remain open to victims.

Thank you.

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